

A Sermon Preached at Maple Street Congregational Church, UCC
Danvers, MA
Rev. Kevin M Smith
September 9, 2018
Mark 7:24-37

Bold Purpose

Our work on our vision last church season produced a simple and elegant statement of purpose:

We share God's love, hope, and healing and serve our neighbor.

In our draft "Vision Statement," which is now in the process of being discussed by the church council and will eventually be discussed and prayerfully considered by all the ministries of the church, as part of our living out the purpose of God's church, we make the bold claim that:

It is our vision to be followers of Jesus before anything else.

Today is "Rally Sunday with a Purpose."

On the path that Jesus walked he went with purpose. I dare say that the path of Jesus, the purpose of Jesus' presence in the midst of the people of the first century Israel and Palestine was the very same purpose this congregation discerned for itself—Jesus' purpose, back then, and through us today, indeed is to share God's love, hope, and healing and serve people—all the people of God. That is, in other words, all people and creatures created by this mysterious, powerful, ultimately unknowable, Spirit we humans have called Adonai, God, or Allah.

I say, "ultimately unknowable," because though we were created in God's image, though we have notions and ideas and feelings and dreams of what we believe God wants us to be, ultimately God cannot be wholly defined by anyone or wholly owned by any group of people. And, as best as we try sometimes we cannot always discern, let alone control the direction of God's purpose in our lives. As we seek to aid God in loving, healing, and

serving by following the path that Jesus trod upon this earth and those early forebears of ours, we rely upon faith and trust in God that no matter the hard times, the pain, the hardships we endure, the uncertainty we have that all will be well in the end as we live in God's love.

The area of Tyre and Sidon that Jesus was visiting on the day we read about had a rich history. Today the area in which Jesus met the Canaanite woman (or as was read, the "Gentile, Syrophenician woman) is known as Lebanon. Lebanon, as we know, has had and continues to have hard times. Civil wars, conquered by Alexander the Great, the Roman Empire, occupied by foreign peoples, including the Israelites, Lebanon's history is rife with eras of violence and oppression. In Jesus time, the ancient Jewish community considered this part of the "Promised Land." Pagans and Jews lived together and apparently well enough that Jesus could find some time to rest in this community.

Still, it seemed there was a certain pecking order or some walls between the Israelite people and the pagan population as when the woman begged Jesus to cast a demon, or do some soul healing of her daughter, Jesus seemed to unconcerned or too busy to help this pagan lady. Perhaps at this time in Jesus' walk he had not fully considered that his mission, his purpose was broader and more expansive than just ministering to the Jewish population. At the least, Jesus was a little stand-offish in this moment. Perhaps this story was included in our scriptures to reflect back to us how we at times act in insular ways toward folks who are outside our circle of family or friends or class or even our political persuasion or even our religion. While the perspective of the author of this gospel was that this woman was a foreigner, truly in fact, Jesus and his people were the foreigners or immigrants who had settled in the woman's land. The Jewish people, just like us all, were immigrants to a foreign land at one time or another. Unless you are indigenous to a specific land you are an immigrant. None of us should forget that in this troubled time in which we live.

Our holy scriptures are replete with people first being reluctant to help others, but then through their faith and obedience to God's call to love, heal, and serve all humans God's love grew between different peoples.

It is not easy proclaiming you are here to walk in the path of Jesus Christ. You have to bold. You have to have faith. You have to step out of your comfort zone. Sacrifice and thoughtfulness is required. If you are rallying

with the purpose of loving, healing, and serving your neighbor, you need courage. In this perilous time in this history of this country too many people would like to set one people over another. Too many people only want to serve their own. That is safe, that is secure, that is clutching onto some perceived privilege or power they think they possess.

When I was a little boy I went to a school called East Liberty. There was another school named West Liberty. We Easters absolutely thought we were better than those kids on the other side of the school district. The rivalry was strong in many ways—academics and athletics mostly. Fairfield, where our school was located was owned by the rich farmers. Spangle seemed to be the place where the hired hands lived. Then the time came and we all came together at our high school, Liberty High. We Easters learned that these “Westers” were pretty much our equals, sometimes even better at us on the ball field and in the classroom. My first love was a Wester. My Dad, the principal of East Liberty always had a hard time accepting this! It wasn’t until this woman and I were much older and she had become an accomplished businesswoman and college professor that I heard my Dad speak fondly of her. Of course, by that time the girl from West Liberty had dumped this boy from East Liberty!! What cheek!!

As we begin this new church season, my last with you, I pray that we will grasp with our whole hearts and minds the purpose that God has given us and that truly, before all else, we seek to serve Jesus Christ and the path he is continuing to lay before us. Be bold Maple Street Church. Have faith, hope, and love and all will truly be well in the end. Before anything else, follow Jesus and All that that means for loving all your neighbors. Amen.

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